

2004

# Marge Piercy: Writer, Feminist, Activist: An Exhibit

Beam, Kathryn; Bartlett, Jean Buescher; Hand, Franki; Wood, Ira

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marge piercy

*writer, feminist, activist*

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**marge piercy**

**writer, feminist, activist**

**an exhibit**

**September 1 to November 27, 2004**

**Curated by Kathryn Beam**

Credits:

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## INTRODUCTION

Marge Piercy, who graduated from the University of Michigan with a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1957, is a world-renowned poet, novelist, and feminist. She is the author of sixteen books of poetry and sixteen novels, as well as drama, essays, criticism, and a memoir entitled *Sleeping With Cats* (2002). Her work has reached a broad audience, being translated into twelve languages, and she has received numerous honors and awards, including recognition by the National Endowment for the Arts in 1978 and the Arthur C. Clarke Award (Great Britain's prestigious award for science fiction) in 1993 for *He, She and It*. Marge Piercy keeps an active schedule of readings and lectures around the world, has taught at various universities, and has served as poetry editor for such magazines as *Tikkun* and *Lilith*.

The record of this significant contribution to the world of arts and letters is a growing collection of manuscripts, literary correspondence, printed ephemera, video tapes, audio material, and photographs housed in the Special Collections Library at the University of Michigan. This archive currently measures about fifty-five linear feet, and is the source of the items on display in this exhibit.

Marge Piercy's life and work are being celebrated by the University of Michigan this fall in both this exhibit and a symposium entitled, "Jewish Women Writing Feminism," October 21-22. Together they reflect themes, images, and patterns emerging over forty years of written work by one of the foremost, socially-conscious writers of our time.

Kathryn Beam, Curator

## EARLY YEARS

### Cases 1 and 2

Marge Piercy attended the University of Michigan from 1953 to 1957. Enroute to her bachelor's degree, Piercy won four writing awards. The Avery and Jule Hopwood Awards in Creative Writing were established in 1930 to reward the best creative work in the fields of dramatic writing, fiction, poetry, and essay. Playwright and alumnus Avery Hopwood bestowed upon the University at the time of his death a significant portion of his estate with the goal of encouraging "the new, the unusual, and the radical." Many of the finest writers of the twentieth century have received from Michigan the extra financial support provided by these awards. Piercy is one, along with Arthur Miller, John Ciardi, Norman Rosten, Nancy Willard, and many others.

On display are two bulletins from the Hopwood contests, one from 1957 listing Piercy's awards in 1954, 1956, and 1957. Each of the winning manuscripts is shown along with remarks by national judges James Earl Powers, John Malcolm Brinnin, and Leonie Adams.

Case 2 displays three proof pages from *Great American Writers: Twentieth Century*, edited by R. Baird Schuman (N.Y.: Marshall Cavendish, 2002). They are part of a biography of Piercy included in volume nine of this series. These pages summarize her childhood in Detroit, her years at the University of Michigan, her first marriage, and her present marriage with Ira Wood. The photographs of her family and herself as a young woman are scarce. There are no photos other than professional portraits in the Piercy archive.



## ACTIVISM

### Cases 3, 4, 5, and 6

Piercy's social consciousness began early. Born in Detroit in 1936, she grew up in a working-class neighborhood which held a mix of Irish, African, and Polish Americans. She became very aware of race, ethnic, gender, and class discrimination.

Experiences in Detroit and Ann Arbor, and later in the urban centers of Chicago, Gary, Indiana, San Francisco, and New York have constituted a steady influence on both her poetry and prose. In 1982 in the novel *Braided Lives* Piercy drew on her own teenage and college years in depicting difficulties of "growing up female in the 1950s." One of the most telling scenes is the one in which a lower-middle-class, Michigan girl must face and carry out the only methods available to her in order to cause an abortion. Piercy's first novel, *Going Down Fast* (1969), concerns urban renewal, police brutality, and university power struggles in Chicago and Gary. Then in *Vida* (1979), the central character is a woman who had been a principal player in the movement against the war in Vietnam, and is, at the time of the story, living as a political fugitive.

These early novels address such issues as sexual freedom, abortion, gender roles in organizations and personal relationships, freedom of speech, and political activism. Similar topics are found in *Breaking Camp*, Piercy's first published book of poetry (1968), as well as in later pamphlets and broadsides that document her continuing activism concerning women's, political, and ecological issues.

Cases 3 – 5 contain early drafts, setting copies, and final publications for *Braided Lives*, *Going Down Fast*, *Vida*, and *Breaking Camp*, in each case offering different versions of certain passages or poems that reflect the creative process. In "The Grand Coolie Dam," a pamphlet published by the New England Free Press in 1969, Piercy gives her reasons for shifting her energies from political activism to the emerging feminist organizations, and in "Getting Together:

How to Start a Women's Liberation Group," published by the same group in 1972, she lays out the basic issues women must address if they are to become independent from men's leadership.

Case 6 contains posters and broadsides advertising appearances by Piercy between 1976 and 2003. They reveal her long-standing participation in the women's movement, a teach-in on the New McCarthyism, a lecture at the National Museum of American Jewish History, and a lecture by Robert Meeropol, son of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg, sponsored by The Leapfrog Press, the publishing firm of Marge Piercy and Ira Wood.

## HISTORICAL FICTION

### Case 7

A critic at the Boston Globe once wrote that in Piercy's work "there's an authenticity of time and place that draws us into the story." This is especially true with her two historical novels, *Gone to Soldiers* (World War II) and *City of Darkness, City of Light* (French Revolution).

That sense of time and place is due in part to characterization and speech patterns, but Piercy's commitment to the correct fact and exact detail is the overwhelming reason for that critic's assessment. For both novels there were research trips to Europe and years devoted to the writing. Piercy even remarked at one point that *Gone to Soldiers* "was such a long novel that we ran out of money while I was working on the third draft."

On display are materials relating to *Gone to Soldiers*: working notebooks and two pages from an "awesome" array of pages attesting to the extensive work with editorial assistants; two typescript drafts and page proofs for the opening of the chapter "One Cold Sunday"; a typescript draft for "The Opening of Abra" with corrections and annotations by Piercy and another reader; and two photographs of the tanker *Ohio*, sent to her by a seaman who was in the Merchant Marine and who served on that ship.



## FEMINIST POETRY

### Case 8

One example of Piercy's many books of poetry written from a feminist perspective is *The Moon is Always Female* (1980). This collection is in two parts, the first a group of poems on subjects that inspired Piercy during the few years preceding publication. The second part, "The Lunar Cycle," is the product of thinking and writing over a twenty-one year period. Piercy says that she first learned of the lunar calendar when she was a child asking about the changing dates of Passover, and then again in 1959 while she was studying the old goddess religions. Since then, and especially after moving to Cape Cod and living near the ocean, Piercy has used her awareness of the lunar calendar in her writing and her daily living.

"The Lunar Cycle" consists of a poem for each of the thirteen lunar months, an extra, introductory poem, and a short epilogue poem. The book is shown along with *The Lunar Calendar: Dedicated to the Goddess in Her Many Guises* (1987) in which Piercy's title poem, "The Moon is Always Female," appears. In that poem Piercy introduces a girl undergoing a clitoridectomy. In an essay published in *Parti-Colored Blocks for a Quilt* (1982), Piercy explains that she awakened one night and physically heard the girl's cry and felt her searing pain.

Also on display are drafts and the setting copy for the poem "At the Well," the poem for the month of Beth. Piercy initially wrote this poem at age twenty-three during the time of the breakup of her first marriage. The first draft, "Encounter with a God," uses a male protagonist and long lines. The poem did not work, even after struggling with it over and over. Years later, while working on "The Lunar Cycle," the poem came back: different titles, corrected sexes, and shorter lines. Then, Piercy says, "the poem began to gather its energy."



## SCIENCE FICTION

### Cases 10 and 14

Some critics call *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976) Piercy's first foray into science fiction. Piercy, however, disagrees. In an interview for the journal *Sandscript* (1977), Piercy says that the novel is primarily about Connie, a middle-thirties Chicana in New York, poor, struggling, labeled a child abuser, and put into a psychiatric facility for having punched in the nose her niece's pimp. Thus the novel would appear to be another of her activist, socially-conscious works, especially in the scenes providing a study of mid-twentieth century practices in mental institutions. But, it also presents two intriguing views of alternative future societies: one in which the human is paramount, and the other in which technology rules and the individual is minimized in cramped, underground existence.

Shown in this case are drafts of two very different versions of page one, the acknowledgement page from the setting copy (reminding readers of Piercy's extensive research for this novel), and a four-page description of Piercy's first future, which she says is not a utopia, but rather a world based primarily on ideas borrowed from the women's movement.

Also on display is the first publication, in the journal *New: American and Canadian Poetry* (1972), of "Laying Down the Tower," a cycle of eleven poems describing the cards of a Tarot reading. The next version of this cycle appeared in the book *To Be of Use* (1973), opened to the poem "The Sun," the last in the Tarot sequence. This poem was the seed of *Woman on the Edge of Time*, and is published here with woodcuts by Lucia Vernarelli.

Piercy's success with *Woman on the Edge of Time* led to opportunities to speak about women's utopian writing and futurist feminism, sometimes at science fiction conferences. These activities increased after the 1991 publication of *He, She and It*, especially after the novel won the 1993 Arthur C. Clarke Award for Best Science Fiction Novel published

in the United Kingdom during the previous year. The novel is Piercy's most extensive utopian story, with settings in the mid twenty-first century and in Prague's Jewish ghetto in the year 1600.

As would be expected Piercy conducted extensive research for this novel. Shown in the exhibit are a variety of articles and clippings reflecting the range of detail needed for the creation of her characters in their respective locales. Also, there are three different drafts for the chapter in which two of the principal characters first meet. The introduction of the human Shira and the cyborg Yod needs to convey much more than a first meeting, and the number of revisions attests to the complexity of describing that event.

## COLLABORATIONS WITH OTHERS

### Case 13

Piercy and her husband Ira Wood began working together on the play *The Last White Class* (published in 1980) as early as the mid-1970s. When it was first performed in 1976 under the title *It's Not the Bus*, it was a two-act, fifty-minute production. After Piercy became involved, she and Wood rewrote it into a much longer work, retaining, however, the central idea of an African-American family under attack in a white neighborhood during the introduction of school busing. On display is page [1] of a five-page plot synopsis for their four-act play, along with a poster advertising the premier performance in Northampton, Massachusetts.

Other collaborations with Wood are the novel *Storm Tide* (1999) and the non-fiction work *So You Want to Write* (2001), a product of workshops given by each author over the years.

The last item in this case is a very early experiment in working with other writers. It is a collection of poems by Emmett Jarrett, Dick Lourie, Robert Hershon, and Piercy entitled *4-Telling*, published by The Crossing Press in 1971. The editor, John Gill, presents these four poets as "the best and most relevant of the New York City poets."



## JUDAIC INFLUENCES

### Case 14

Piercy's ever-present awareness of her Jewish history, culture, and faith has inspired much of her writing. In recent years she has published *The Art of Blessing the Day: Poems on Jewish Themes*, in hard-bound by Alfred A. Knopf (1999) and in paperback by Five Leaves Publications (1998). The Knopf edition is open to "The Housing Project at Drancy," a poem in which the narrator travels to Drancy, a town in France, to visit the remains of a concentration camp that is now the site of "a housing project crammed with mothers," a place no one wants to talk about or even remember.

Two periodicals are on display, *New Menorah* (Second Series, No. 8, 1987) and *Lilith* (Vol. 28, No. 2, Summer 2003). "Nishmet" in the journal *New Menorah* is part of Piercy's work with the P'nai Or Siddur Project, a poem to be used in morning prayers. "My Grandmother's Song," in *Lilith*, remembers Jewish girls of earlier generations washing clothes in the river, laughing and gossiping, but always aware of dangers lurking nearby. Piercy has published more than 700 poems in periodicals over the course of her career.

The last item shown reflects yet another way Piercy's poems are being used. It is *HaLaila HaZeh: an Israeli Haggadah*, compiled by Mishaël and Noam Zion and published in Jerusalem in 2004. The book presents the traditional text on the right page of a double-page spread with the left page providing commentary and poetry based on that text. The text for Piercy's poem concerns the bitter herbs taken as part of the Passover meal. The poem, in Hebrew, begins with the line "To chew bitterness...." It then refers to the Jews when they were slaves in Egypt, suggesting that people are still slaves in their own prisons. She ends the poem with the line "bitterness is the first taste of freedom." (Translation provided by Marlene Gitelman, Area Programs/Near East Division, University Library.)

## BROADSIDES, POSTERS, DUST JACKETS, AWARDS

### Cases 2, 9, 11, and 12

Much information about an author can be found in the format of the poster, and certainly on the various parts of dust jackets. These cases offer an array of informative and often beautiful pieces.

The awards in Case 2 are two of the many that have been bestowed on Piercy throughout her long career. The first (1974) is for her "outstanding accomplishments in the field of Literature," signed by the governor of Massachusetts, Francis W. Sargent. The second (2001), given by Women of Reform Judaism, was presented to her because of her contributions to educational programs and projects, described on the award as "deeds of loving-kindness."

Cases 9, 11, and 12 present dust jackets from eight of her books, posters advertising readings and lectures in a wide variety of venues, and broadsides that are particularly successful collaborations between graphic artist and author. One unusual creation is the broadside entitled "The world comes back, like an old cat." The author, translator, artist, and graphic designer contributed this piece to "Poetry on the Buses," a series published by Carnegie Mellon University. This copy looks as if it actually was posted on a bus for awhile.



**Upcoming Exhibit:**

**From Papyri to King James:  
The Evolution of the English Bible**

**December 1, 2004 - January 20, 2005**